

Talking Points

Amnesty International's Policy on Sexual and Reproductive Rights

Background

- Amnesty International's decision to address limited aspects of abortion is a response to the suffering and injustice it has documented on violence against women, forced pregnancy, and serious risks to a woman's life and health. The intent is to strengthen Amnesty's work to protect women in these tragic circumstances.
- The organization hopes that by working to stop violence against women, instances of forced and unwanted pregnancies will be reduced, as will instances when termination of pregnancy is sought.
- Women who are raped -- particularly when rape becomes a weapon of war in armed conflict -- are doubly stigmatized; first, as victims of sexual abuse and then for becoming pregnant. In war, rape is intended to destroy community and family bonds through humiliation and shame.
- In many countries, women who want to end their pregnancies have no option except life-threatening, unsafe abortions. And each year, 70,000 women around the world die from unsafe abortions and another 5 million suffer life-threatening complications, including lifelong disabilities and infertility. This burden overwhelmingly falls on women in the developing world.
- Amnesty International seeks to strengthen the right of all women to be free of any form of coercion, discrimination or violence as they make and put into effect informed decisions regarding their fertility.
- Darfur, Sudan and the Democratic Republic of Congo are examples of tragic circumstances of armed conflicts where women and girls have been subjected to rape on a large scale. While Amnesty International has fought for justice for these women, it has been unable to address the heartrending cases of women who face trauma, stigma and even threats to their lives because they are bearing "a child of the enemy."

Addresses Abortion in Limited Circumstances

- Amnesty International has long campaigned on issues of sexual and reproductive health such as opposition to forced abortions, sterilization and female genital mutilation. In the last two years, it has engaged in discussion with its members on the issue of abortion itself. Following these careful consultations, the organization's governing body concluded that Amnesty International should not remain silent on the question of abortion in particular circumstances.
- Amnesty International, which has previously stated its opposition to coerced abortions and abortions for sex selection purposes, will now address abortion in areas relevant to its work on violence against women and serious human rights violations:
- Opposing imprisonment and other criminal penalties for abortion, for women and providers.
- Urging governments to ensure access to health and other services to women who have complications from unsafe abortions.
- Supporting early safe termination of pregnancy for women who become pregnant as a result of rape, sexual assault or incest -- or whose lives or health are at serious risk due to a pregnancy. Amnesty International USA has no immediate plans to begin campaign activities in this area. The organization will be working over the next six months to determine how to effectively engage on these issues.

Takes No Position on Legalization and Other Related Issues

- AI does not take a position on whether abortion is right or wrong or whether it should be legal.
- AI does not seek to promote a "human right to abortion" and will not campaign for the legalization of abortion generally.
- AI does not take a position on specific laws regulating the termination of pregnancy.
- AI will not counsel individuals as to what reproductive decisions they should make.

Diversity of Viewpoints on Abortion

- Amnesty International recognizes and respects the diversity of religious viewpoints on abortion. Some religious believers view abortion as a violation of the right to life, but international law is silent on the question of when life begins, and Amnesty International takes no position on this issue.
- Amnesty International believes that one of its greatest strengths has been the solidarity forged among people of diverse beliefs who share a commitment to ending human suffering.
- In this spirit, the organization's leadership believes that its members and supporters can continue to collaborate on specific human rights issues without having to change or challenge their beliefs on issues such as abortion.